Why Do People Fall for Fake News?
Are they blinded by their political passions? Or are they just intellectually lazy?

By Gordon Pennycook and David Rand
January 19, 2019

[1] What makes people **susceptible to** fake news and other forms of **strategic misinformation**? And what, if anything, can be done about it?

[2] These questions have become more **urgent** in recent years, not least because of **revelations** about the Russian campaign to influence the 2016 United States presidential election by **disseminating propaganda** through social media platforms. In general, our political culture seems to be increasingly populated by people who **espouse outlandish** or **demonstrably** false claims that often **align with** their **political ideology**.

[3] The good news is that psychologists and other social scientists are working hard to understand what prevents people from seeing through propaganda. The bad news is that there is not yet a **consensus** on the answer. Much of the debate among researchers falls into two opposing **camps**. One group claims that our ability to reason is hijacked by our **partisan convictions**: that is, we're prone to **rationalization**. The other group — to which the two of us belong — claims that the problem is that we often fail to **exercise** our **critical faculties**: that is, we're mentally lazy.

[4] However, recent research suggests a **silver lining** to the **dispute**: Both camps appear to be **capturing** an aspect of the problem. Once we understand how much of the problem is a result of rationalization and how much a result of laziness, and as we learn more about which factor plays a role in what types of situations, we'll be better able to design policy solutions to help **combat** the problem.

[5] The rationalization camp, which has gained considerable **prominence** in recent years, is built around a set of theories **contending** that when it comes to **politically charged** issues, people use their intellectual abilities to persuade themselves to believe what they want to be true rather than attempting to actually discover the truth. According to this view, **political passions** essentially make people unreasonable, even — indeed, especially — if they tend to be good at reasoning in other contexts. (Roughly: The smarter you are, the better you are at rationalizing.)

[6] Some of the most striking evidence used to support this **position** comes from an influential 2012 study in which the law professor Dan Kahan and his colleagues found that the degree of **political polarization** on the issue of climate change was greater among people who scored higher on measures of science literary and numerical ability than it was among those who scored lower on these tests. Apparently, more "analytical" Democrats were better able to convince themselves that climate change

was a problem, while more "analytical" Republicans were better able to convince themselves that climate change was not a problem. Professor Kahan has found similar results in, for example, studies about gun control in which he experimentally manipulated the **partisan slant** of information that participants were asked to assess.

[7] The implications here are profound: Reasoning can **exacerbate** the problem, not provide the solution, when it comes to partisan disputes over facts. Further evidence cited in support of this of argument comes from a 2010 study by the political scientists Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, who found that **appending** corrections to misleading claims in news articles can sometimes **backfire**: Not only did corrections fail to reduce **misperceptions**, but they also sometimes increased them. It seemed as if people who were **ideologically inclined** to believe a given falsehood worked so hard to come up with reasons that the correction was wrong that they came to believe the falsehood even more strongly.

[8] But this "rationalization" **account**, though compelling in some contexts, does not **strike** us as the most natural or most common explanation of the human weakness for misinformation. We believe that people often just don't think critically enough about the information they encounter.

[9] A great deal of research in **cognitive** psychology has shown that a little bit of reasoning goes a long way toward forming accurate beliefs. For example, people who think more analytically (those who are more likely to exercise their analytic skills and not just trust their **"gut" response**) are less **superstitious**, less likely to believe in **conspiracy theories** and less receptive to seemingly profound but actually **empty assertions** (like "Wholeness quiets infinite phenomena"). This body of evidence suggests that the main factor explaining the acceptance of fake news could be cognitive laziness, especially in the context of social media, where news items are often skimmed or merely glanced at.

[10] To test this possibility, we recently ran a set of studies in which participants of various **political persuasions** indicated whether they believed a series of news stories. We showed them real headlines taken from social media, some of which were true and some of which were false. We **gauged** whether our participants would engage in reasoning or "go with their gut" by having them complete something called the cognitive reflection test, a test widely used in psychology and behavioral economics. It consists of questions with **intuitively** compelling but incorrect answers, which can be easily shown to be wrong with a **modicum** of reasoning. (For example: "If you're running a race and you pass the person in second place, what place are you in?" If you're not thinking you might say "first place," when of course the answer is second place.)

[11] We found that people who engaged in more reflective reasoning were better at telling true from false, regardless of whether the headlines aligned with their political views. (We controlled for **demographic** facts such as level of education as well as political leaning.) In follow-up studies yet to be published, we have shown that this

finding was **replicated** using a **pool** of participants that was nationally representative with respect to age, gender, ethnicity and region of residence, and that it applies not just to the ability to **discern** true claims from false ones but also to the ability to identify excessively partisan coverage of true events.

[12] Our results strongly suggest that somehow **cultivating** or promoting our reasoning abilities should be part of the solution to the kinds of partisan misinformation that **circulate** on social media. And other new research provides evidence that even in highly political contexts, people are not as irrational as the rationalization camp contends. Recent studies have shown, for instance, that correcting partisan misperceptions does not backfire most of the time — contrary to the results of Professors Nyhan and Reifler described above — but instead leads to more accurate beliefs.

[13] We are not arguing that findings such as Professor Kahan's that support the rationalization theory are unreliable. Our argument is that cases in which our reasoning goes **awry** — which are surprising and attention-grabbing — seem to be exceptions rather than the rule. Reason is not always, or even typically, **held captive** by our partisan **biases**. In many and perhaps most cases, it seems, reason does promote the formation of accurate beliefs.

[14] This is not just an academic debate; it has real **implications** for public policy. Our research suggests that the solution to **politically charged** misinformation should involve devoting resources to the spread of accurate information and to training or encouraging people to think more critically. You aren't **doomed** to be unreasonable, even in highly politicized times. Just remember that this is also true of people you disagree with.

Gordon Pennycook is an assistant professor at the Hill & Levene Schools of Business at the University of Regina, in Saskatchewan. David Rand is an associate professor at the Sloan School of Management and the department of brain and cognitive sciences at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

This article was originally published in *The New York Times*.